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Penguin's New Translation of Pinocchio Aims to Recapture Collodi's Original

Our interview with John Hooper and Anna Kraczyna, whose annotated English edition corrects the mistaken belief that it was “just children’s literature”

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



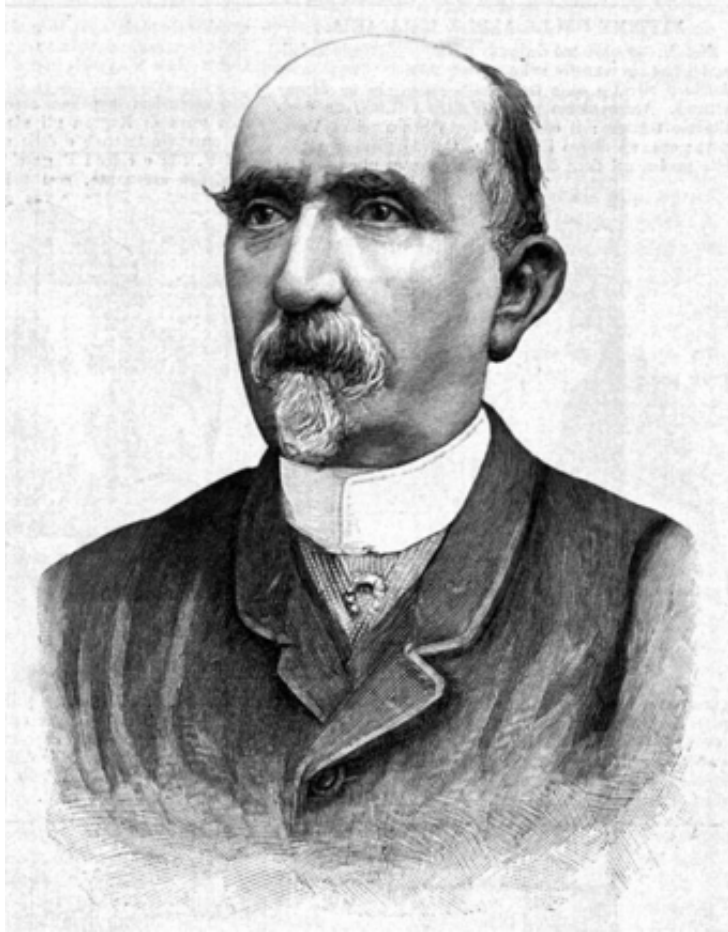
Anna Kraczyna and John Hooper, translators of Collodi's Pinocchio. Photo: Courtesy of Kraczyna and Hooper.

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Disney distorted the personality of the central character, replaced the message at the heart of the fable, and changed the setting...but Pinocchio is a story with many, many, levels of cultural, social, political, culinary and religious (particularly the “prodigal son” and resurrection) significance. It’s a text far more complex than generally realized-as are Alice in Wonderland and Gulliver’s Travels...

Carlo Lorenzini (1826-1890) was an Italian government employee, journalist, political satirist, literary and music critic, translator and author. The eldest of ten children, only three of whom grew up, he was born to a cook and a seamstress at Via Taddea 21 in central

Florence. Although the Marchese Ginori Lisci employed both his parents, Collodi's family was very poor and lived in damp overcrowded quarters. So, Carlo spent most of his childhood with his grandmother in his mother's birthplace, the town of Collodi (some forty miles northwest of Florence), which he later chose as his pen name.



Carlo Collodi. Photo: Wikipedia.

Beginning on July 7, 1881, Collodi's masterpiece, "Le avventure di Pinocchio: Storia di un burattino", was published in installments in a newspaper for children, "Il Giornale per i bambini", and then in book form in 1883. Since then, it's been translated into more than 260 languages, more than any other book except The Bible, tied in second place with Antoine de Saint Exupéry's "Le Petit Prince".

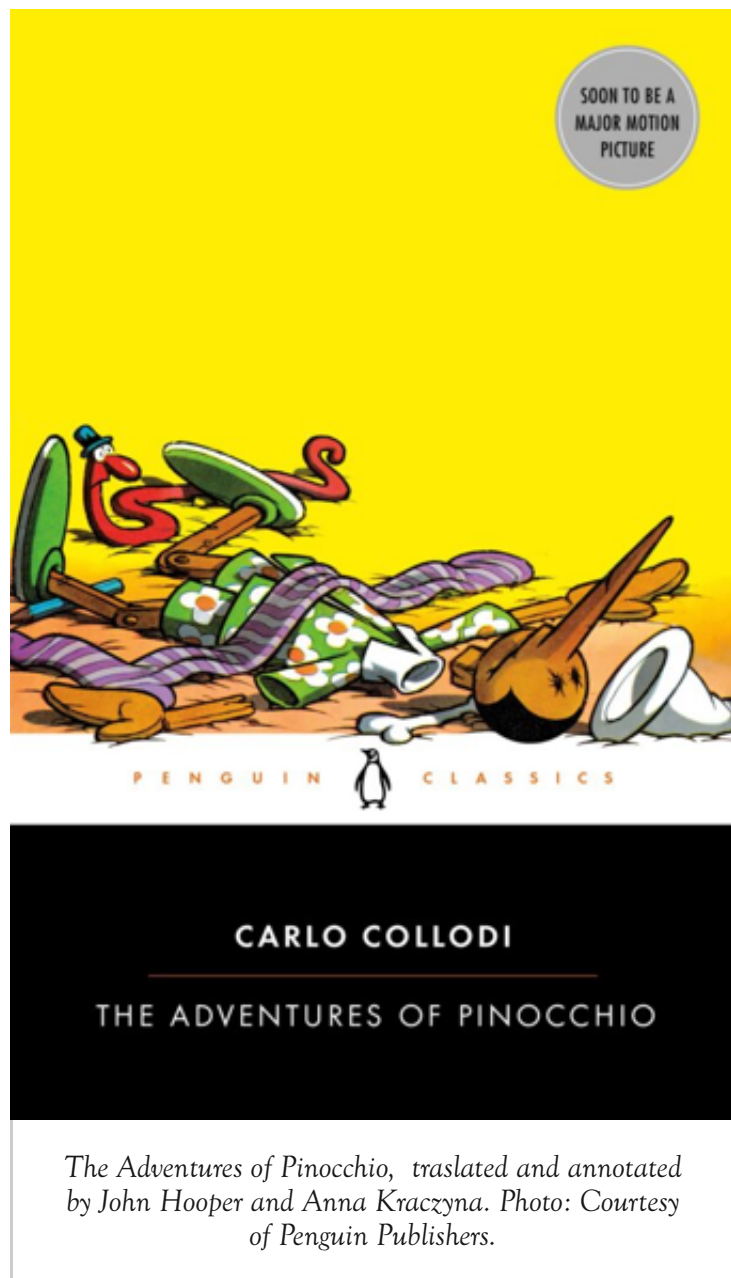
Pinocchio's earliest English translations were in London by Mary Alice Murray in 1892 and in the United States by Walter S. Cramp and Charles Copeland in 1901. Last month, on September 14th, Penguin published what is probably the first annotated translation in English (\$15) by John Hooper and Anna Kraczyna. Hooper (JH) is The Economist's correspondent in Italy and Vatican City, and the author of the bestseller The Italians. Anna

Kraczyrna (AK), born in Florence to American artists, is a professor of literature, translator, and interpreter. Both teach at Florence's Stanford University Campus. Lucy Gordan interviewed them about Pinocchio for La Voce di New York.

Why yet another translation of *Pinocchio*?

JH: “One day Anna said to me, “Do you realize that *Pinocchio* is a story with many, many, levels of cultural, social, political, culinary (more about hunger than food), and religious (particularly the ‘prodigal son’ and resurrection) significance? It’s a text far more complex than generally realized-as are *Alice in Wonderland* and *Gulliver’s Travels*? At that point the annotated edition of *Alice* came to my mind so, to cut a long story short, my New York agent proposed our idea to several publishers and New York-based Penguin Classics gave us an advance for an annotated edition of *Pinocchio*.”

AK: “For at least 15 years I’d wanted to let people know what *Pinocchio* is really about. Everyone thinks it’s a children’s story about a bratty liar whose nose grows longer with each lie; that lying is bad; and what can happen to you if you lie; but that’s not what *Pinocchio* is about at all. It’s a social commentary, often satirical.”



Please explain.

AK: “Collodi highlights several traits of the Italian character, still valid today. He praises its admirable qualities: the importance of family ties and the capacity for putting up with life’s vicissitudes, but he satirizes others: *bella figura*, the Italian need to make the best possible impression on others at whatever cost; *furbizia* or getting their way through duplicity or inventiveness, even if dubiously motivated; and their talent for flattery, often insincere.

He ridicules naiveté, like Pinocchio’s believing the Cat and the Fox; political and judicial corruption: *tangenti* or kickbacks like Pinocchio’s buying his freedom as the farmer’s watchdog from weasels in exchange for giving them access to the farmer’s eggs and chickens;

the judge, an ape mind you, who sends innocent Pinocchio to jail not for a crime, but for his ingenuity; the inefficient (and still today frequently ridiculed) *carabinieri* who arrest the wrong person, to cite a few examples.

Collodi believed in the university of life, that you learn from your own mistakes; that if you don't apply yourself in school, you will remain a donkey and have a donkey's life of unremitting hardship as an unskilled laborer. Moreover, you will always remain a puppet of someone else's decisions.

Pinocchio isn't a fairy tale with princes and princesses; it's a denunciation of the injustices—the hunger and misery—the poor suffer with no redress; it reflects Collodi's despondency over the conditions in the nation he'd helped, through military service and his writings, to form. In short, it's a satire of immediate Post-Unification Italy."

The date of the most recent translation before yours?

AK: "We don't know, but the most acclaimed was by the American poet Geoffrey Brock published in 2012 by the *New York Book Review*, with an introduction by Umberto Eco. I doubt Eco would have written his introduction had he read the translation because it's full of mistakes and poetic license. I grew up in the countryside around Florence so that Collodi's language is my language too. I can understand the nuances that even non-Tuscan Italians can't. Hence our annotations."

Isn't yours the first annotated translation?

JH and AK: "Again we can't be sure because there have been so many translations. Daniela Marcheschi published an authoritative annotated version of a selection of Collodi's works in Italian in 1995."

A review of your still unpublished translation appeared in the *NY Times* in 2019; why did Penguin take so long to publish it? It seems from the cover that Penguin was waiting for Walt Disney's new film of *Pinocchio*, which still has to be released?

JH: "Yes, that's what it comes down to."

About the Walt Disney movie: its 1940 cartoon was set in an unidentified, perhaps Swiss,

setting, certainly not in Italy because our allies were already at war with Mussolini, but what about its remake?

JH: “There are two upcoming movies, both in the works for a long time. One, directed by Guillermo del Toro and acquired by Netflix, is a cartoon set in Fascist Italy. The other is Disney’s live-action-GCI animated musical fantasy starring Tom Hanks as Geppetto. We know very little about it, though we fear it will be faithful to the 1940 original including its alpine Never-Never-Land setting.”

AK: “The fact that Guillermo del Toro sets his *Pinocchio* in Fascist Italy in our opinion maybe reflects *Pinocchio*’s main message: you don’t want people to pull your strings; you want to think for yourself. Therefore, Del Toro’s interpretation isn’t far removed from what *Pinocchio* is really about. Instead, Disney’s alpine setting is totally out of context.

There’s also Iginio Straffi’s forthcoming TV series about Pinocchio for small children. The inventor of the ‘Winks’, he’s just presented his new *Pinocchio*, set in Tuscany, at the Venice Film Festival. Like Collodi’s, Straffi’s *Pinocchio* is about the importance of education and taking responsibility for your actions. He rereads *Pinocchio* in the same light we insist on. He brings it back to its original Tuscan context.”

Does your translation have no illustrations because it’s intended as a compendium to the new Disney film?

JH: “It’s a bit ambiguous, because, although the book cover mentions the release of a “Pinocchio” film, it doesn’t specify which one. Of course, we’re hoping these films will excite interest in our book. To have no illustrations was Penguin’s decision, but illustrations would have reiterated some of the earlier translations’ glaring mistakes like using ax instead of adze for Mr. Cherry’s tool or whale instead of shark. Thus, we’re delighted that Penguin didn’t include potentially misleading illustrations.”

AK: “If Penguin had included illustrations, we’d have wanted only Enrico Mazzanti’s, which Collodi had approved for his 1883 first edition.”

But without illustrations, who will be your purchasers?

JH: “I hope adults who will thus learn about the story’s many layers of meaning. Our

annotations shed new light on *Pinocchio*. They point out, for example, that the blue-haired fairy was based on a real person; that many of the settings Collodi chose were places near Florence; that Collodi was very familiar with Homer, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Manzoni, Verga and others.”

AK: “*Pinocchio* is almost like ‘the Prodigal Son’ or *I Promessi sposi* for children.”



Page from “Il Giornale per i bambini” July 7, 1881.

Photo: Wikipedia.

The text is so moralistic and repetitive, is there really a market for *Pinocchio* today in any language?

AK: “Yes. Otherwise, it wouldn’t still be one of the world’s most translated books. *Pinocchio*

connects to readers of all ages no matter where, and at different levels at different ages.”

Its advertisement says: “C’è in questo romanzetto tutto il succo del buon senso italiano innestato al più schietto humor, che non ha più dritto di chiamarsi inglese” (we find in this brief narrative all the essence of Italian common sense grafted onto the cheekiest humor, that we can no longer rightly call English.)

AK: “This publicity, issued before *Pinocchio* was published in the *Giornale*, says: ‘Here’s a book that with ironic wit describes Italian traits. We no longer need British humor; we have our own.’”

So Collodi was familiar with British humor. Any particular book?

AK: “Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*”.

Before *Pinocchio* Collodi wrote textbooks for schoolchildren, right?

AK: “Yes, Collodi certainly wrote his textbooks for schoolchildren as well as *Pinocchio* with the intention of unifying Italians linguistically. When he uses a Tuscan word, it’s always one that can be understood by Italians outside Tuscany. Collodi helped to compile the dictionary intended for all Italians to learn Tuscan Italian that was to become standard Italian.”

Since there was such a high illiteracy rate in Italy in the early 1880s, who read *Pinocchio*?

AK: “The children who went to school, although only a small percent, would have had access to *Il Giornale per i bambini*. Moreover, his earlier *Giannettino*, probably read in schools, was even more popular. It went into 19 reprints.”

Did Collodi turn to writing for children because he’d become disillusioned with the King and his Risorgimento government leaders, particularly on social issues?

AK: “Yes, Collodi realized that his contemporaries and the Government weren’t responding to the ideals he had and was still fighting for; thus it was more important to transmit these to future generations. This said, he had a government job, and one of the Ministers had sent out a circular that public officials were NOT to criticize the Government. Some scholars believed it was purposely aimed at Collodi, but even so, Collodi never stopped writing his satirical articles.”

Collodi's first works for children were translations of French fairy tales by Perrault entitled *Racconti delle fate* in 1875, followed by *Giannettino* (inspired by Alessandro Luigi Parravicini's *Giannetto*), *Minuzzolo and Il Viaggio di Giannettino* (a pedagogic series which explored the unification of Italy through the ironic thoughts and actions of *Giannettino*) in 1877. After *Pinocchio* he published *Pipì o lo scimmiettino di colore rosa* about a naughty monkey not unlike Pinocchio, do you think that Collodi was considering a sequel?

JH: “No, because otherwise he wouldn't have written *Pipì*, about a monkey so similar to Pinocchio. Also, since at the end Pinocchio becomes a good little boy, a sequel would have ruined the original story.”

How autobiographical is *Pinocchio*?

JH: “There's a lot about Collodi that we don't know because, after his death, his brother Paolo burned his letters; he'd found many that compromised well-known Florentine women, who were still alive. However, Collodi had written a short essay or memoir entitled ‘Quando ero ragazzo’. There he talks about being a wild kid and about a prank he played on his schoolmates that is also played on Pinocchio.”

Are there any biographies of Collodi in English?

AK: “I don't know of any. In Italian, there's a good ‘*cronologia*’ section in the Meridiano Mondadori edition on Collodi and there's a *biografia* by Filippo Canali: *Carlo Collodi Lorenzini: Un comunicatore nel XIX secolo*. In his stories, the son of Collodi's brother Ippolito, Paolo Lorenzini, who took the pseudonym “Collodi nipote,” gives us some biographical information, particularly what Collodi's mother had to say about his being a wild little boy.”

Like Disney's 1940 film, *Pinocchio* doesn't seem to be set in any recognizable place or in any specific historical period. Was this intentional on Collodi's part to give the story longevity and universality?

Pinocchio (1940) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Tra...



JH: “We identify some places in our annotations, but they’re not obvious monuments. In a lecture we’re giving next week at the British Institute in Florence, we’ll identify more people and places in *Pinocchio*: Paolo and his wife owned a villa in the town of Castello, which is now part of Florence near the airport. They spent their summers there with Carlo. Geppetto and Mr. Cherry were two carpenters there; the Cat and the Fox two local scoundrels; the blue-haired fairy was the little blue-eyed daughter of the villa’s gardener; the big oak tree really existed as did the *osteria* ‘*The Gambero Rosso*’ which served red crayfish from the nearby stream.”

AK: “As far as the historical period goes, we tried to trace it through coinage. Collodi refers to money all issued before his time, but we do the same when we refer to *soldi* and *lire*. So, the chronology is unclear.”

JH: “Let’s not forget the circular. Collodi had only so much leeway. He was sailing close to the wind in some of his satirical comments. Maybe he was trying to give the impression that he was referring to pre-Unification Italy so as not to get into trouble in his post-Unification Italy.”

Pinocchio Official Trailer | Only in Theaters This Chri...



One of the many film versions of Pinocchio, directed by Matteo Garrone and starring Roberto Benigni, 2019.

In Chapter 15 Pinocchio dies so Collodi ended the story. Due to protests from his readers, he took up the story again, but how did he get away with bringing Pinocchio back to life in such a Catholic country?

AK: “Because although left hanging from a tree, Pinocchio didn’t actually die. It’s also interesting to note that, after Pinocchio is resurrected, the ‘resurrected’ story becomes much more like other fairy tales.”

Everyone associates Pinocchio with having a long, pointed nose that grew longer each time he told a lie, but this doesn’t happen until Chapter 17 and not always afterwards even then, so how did it become such an important feature? Because of Disney’s 1940 film?

JH: “Yes. Seldom has a work of literature been so overshadowed by its celluloid adaptation. As we point out in the introduction, Disney ‘distorted the personality of the central character, replaced the message at the heart of the fable, and changed the setting.’”

Why do you think *Pinocchio* became more popular than *Peter Pan*, *Mary Poppins*, *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Little Prince*?

JH: “Because Pinocchio is universal. Pinocchio is popular for the same reason as Bart Simpson. He’s a brat so children relate to him.”

The philosopher and literary critic Benedetto Croce believed that *Pinocchio* was one of the greatest works of Italian literature; do you agree?

AK: “Yes, because in some parts the language is as beautiful as Dante’s. Unfortunately, you inevitably lose some of this linguistic beauty and its subtlety in translation.”

[Lucy Gordan](#)

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Italian Hours

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